

## BACH 706 - J. S. BACH (1685-1750): Violin & Trio Sonatas

On December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1717, 32-year-old Johann Sebastian Bach arrived at the small Court of Anhalt-Cöthen to hold the position of Capellmeister, the highest rank given to a musician during the Baroque age. His master was the young prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, at barely 25 a relative youngster like Bach and indeed seven years Bach's junior.

The Prince was the son of a Calvinist, and as the Calvinists were antagonistic to the splendors of the Lutheran liturgy, there was no church music at Cöthen. However, the young Prince's religious beliefs did not bar him from enjoying a cheerful and cultivated style of living complete with secular cantatas and instrumental music featuring the latest styles and fashions.

Prince Leopold had already spent three years (1710-13) doing the "Grand Tour" of Europe, first to Holland and England, through Germany to Italy where he studied Italian secular music with great interest; returning by way of Vienna. He had well-developed musical tastes, and he returned from his "Grand Tour" determined to raise the standard of German secular music to an equally high level, to which end he stretched the limited budget of his miniature Court to provide an orchestra of eighteen players, all chosen for their high musical standards from all over the country, some from as far afield as Berlin. In fact it was during the Prince's Grand Tour in 1713 that news came to him of a golden opportunity: when Wilhelm I of Prussia came to power, he dismissed his father's Court Capelle, and Prince Leopold was able to tempt many of the best musicians from Berlin to Cöthen.

Unlike most Princes of his time, he was a player of considerable proficiency on the harpsichord, the violin and the viola da gamba, and contrary to current Court etiquette, perhaps as a reflection of his youth, he played quite freely and informally with his Court musicians, treating them entirely as his equals. He soon became very friendly with his new Capellmeister, having a high regard for him, and would often ask his advice on various matters. Life at Cöthen was informal and easy-going; in this happy atmosphere Bach's days were completely devoted to music.

During this period he wrote much of his Chamber Music; Violin Concertos, Flute, Violin, and Trio Sonatas, Keyboard Music, the Sonatas and Partitas for Unaccompanied Violin, the Suites for Unaccompanied Violoncello, the Six Brandenburg Concertos, and probably the Orchestral Suites.

Bach found here daily encouragement to compose and play chamber music, and he took his opportunity with a keen willingness. In addition there is some evidence that Bach was in touch with, and probably visited at Cöthen by, the celebrated violinist Pisendel from Dresden – it has been suggested that Bach's Solo Violin works were composed with Pisendel in mind.

When the Prince traveled, Bach and some of the best Court musicians (together with instruments, including an ingenious folding harpsichord) would accompany him on his extensive journeys. Twice they visited Carlsbad in Bohemia, the meeting place of the European aristocracy, both in 1718 and in the summer of 1720. These were dazzling aristocratic gatherings of Counts, Princes and Noblemen, and musical concerts were organized daily in which resident and visiting musicians would have participated. No doubt Prince Leopold was proud to show off the talents of his small orchestra.

In December, 1721, however, the Prince married. And for Bach this was to be an unfortunate event, as the new Princess disapproved of and actively discouraged her husband's musical activities. As Bach wrote to his old school-friend, Erdmann, *'There I had a gracious Prince as master, who knew music as well as he loved it, and I hoped to remain in his service until the end of my life'*. Thus it was that just over a year later Bach took up a new position as Cantor of St Thomas' Church, Leipzig.

At the beginning of the 18th century, Saxony was by far the most developed German territorial state, with Leipzig as its economic capital. The city's tri-annual Fairs brought a cosmopolitan atmosphere and a breadth of vision as merchants gathered from all over Europe. Leipzigers had extensive intellectual and cultural interests; their cultivation of literature and the fine arts, as well as the setting-up of libraries and rich art collections evinced a wide-ranging pursuit of entertainment and education, and the city enjoyed a rich musical life.

A major source of entertainment was provided by the Collegia Musica - secular musical organizations, run mainly by the students of the city's famed University and dating back at least to the middle of the preceding century, if not its beginning. Many of Leipzig's most famous musicians were connected with the students' musical activities (among them several Thomaskantors) and contributed music of the highest quality. Various such groups came and went. At the beginning of the 1700s, two new ones - which were to enjoy a comparatively long existence - were founded by two young men at the University who were eventually to number among the most celebrated composers of their time. One was established in 1702 by the redoubtable Georg Philipp Telemann; the other was begun six years later, by Johann Friedrich Fasch. Fasch's organization ultimately fell to the direction of Johann Gottlieb Görner, the director of music at the University and a constant musical rival of Bach's. After Telemann left Leipzig the leadership of his Collegium was taken by Balthasar Schott, the Neukirche Organist. In the spring of 1729, Schott moved to a new position in Gotha, and Bach took over directorship of the Collegium.

The story of Bach's Collegium Musicum is closely bound to a Leipzig coffeeshop-proprietor named Gottfried Zimmermann. The concerts were given on Zimmermann's premises, probably under his auspices. During the winter, the group played every Friday night, from 6 to 8pm, in Zimmermann's Coffee House on the Cather Strasse, placed close to the central Marktplatz. In the warmer months, the music was moved outdoors, to Zimmermann's Coffee Garden "*in front of the Grimma gate, on the Grimma Stone Road*" - so the address is given in contemporary reports, with Summer performances on Wednesdays, from 4 to 6pm.

That Gottfried Zimmerman was not only a restaurateur and impresario, but also a music-lover and quite possibly a competent musician, is indicated by several contemporary newspaper reports that he frequently re-equipped his establishment with the latest musical instruments for use by the Collegium and other musical guests. One of his prize possessions in the late 1720s was "*a clavicymbel of large size and range of expressivity*" which made it a Leipzig attraction in itself. An even finer instrument was obtained in 1733.

Two types of concerts were given: *ordinaire*, the normal regular performances and *extraordinaire* for special celebrations (Kings' birthdays etc), and were usually marked by elaborate festive Cantatas, with trumpets and drums in full splendor.

At the regular concerts mainly instrumental music was heard, including clavier works drawn from the Clavierübung and the "48". The need for instrumental pieces provided Bach with the opportunity to revive much of his Cöthen and Weimar work, including the Trio Sonatas and the Violin Sonatas on this disc. On these occasions too Bach's Concerti for one or several harpsichords received their performances, many of these having been adapted from earlier (e.g. violin) concertos, or from concertos by other composers (eg Vivaldi). It is also on record that works of Handel, Vivaldi, Telemann, Locatelli, Albinoni and others were also performed here. Admission was charged for the *Extraordinaire* Concerts, and also for those occasional "Special Concerts" (*Sonder-konzerte*) which featured distinguished visiting artists. The regular concerts were probably free.

These concerts were serious events, given outside of the regular coffee shop hours, and were thus not merely an ornament to the usual diversions offered there. The performances of the Collegium were, in fact, hardly different from what we consider to be normal concert procedure today. Indeed, the word "concert" began to be used expressly in connection with the Leipzig Collegium during its later years.

The schedule of weekly performances, the composition of new works, rehearsing them, arranging programs, etc., reveals that the Collegium Musicum was no mere diversion for Bach. The fact is that this was, for much of his later life, his central artistic activity, the Church becoming almost peripheral. In his years with the Collegium Bach satisfied a side of himself that certainly must have lain dormant since the happy and fruitful period at Cöthen. He remained its Director from 1729 until the death of Gottfried Zimmermann in 1741.

If two of the works on this disc, the Sonata in G Major BWV 1021 and the Trio Sonata in G Major BWV 1038, sound familiar it is because they both share the same bass line. Similarly BWV 1039 will be recognized by anyone familiar with the Cello and Harpsichord Sonata BWV 1027, a later re-working.